

Danny Lyon: Photo-Film, 1959-1993



*"The camera shows us a chilling hole:
a gap between our rhetoric and the reality.
And the implied question is,
What are you going to do about it?"*

Daniel Jesse Wolff

The Corcoran Gallery of Art, February 5 - April 4, 1994

Introduction

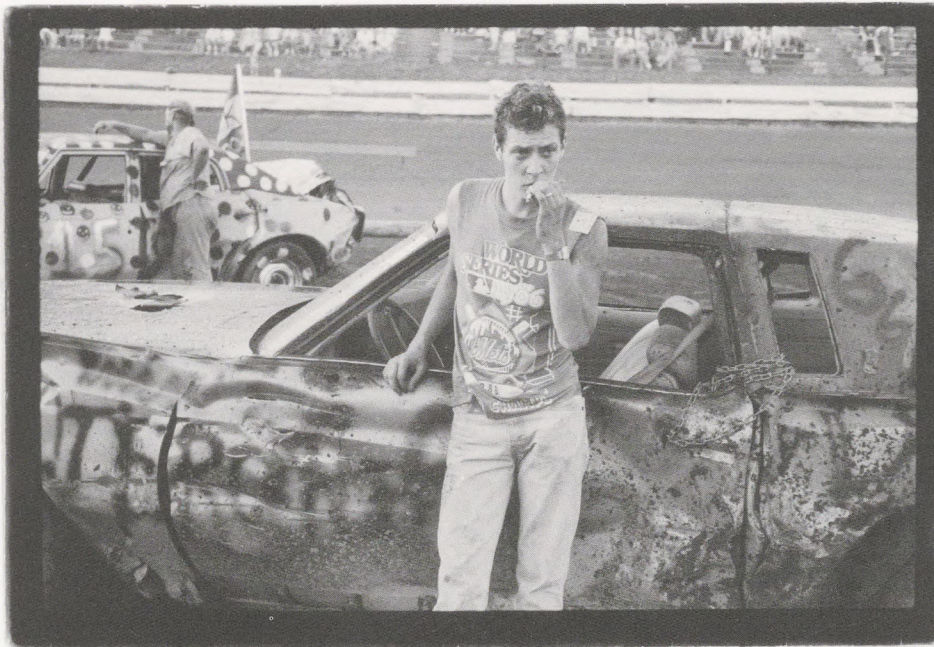
Danny Lyon has created one of the most significant documentary portraits of U.S. society during the past thirty years. Lyon's earliest photographs chronicle the American south during a time of turmoil and transition. His most recent images depict young men who sell drugs on the street in Bushwick, a Brooklyn neighborhood near Lyon's childhood home. This retrospective exhibition surveys his photographs and films from 1959 to 1993. Lyon's photographs and films provide a visual record of the transformation of American culture from a racially segregated society to one whose institutions continue their struggle to redefine concepts of equal opportunity.

In much of his work, Danny Lyon addresses institutions that represent power and order in our world. He also comments on the lives of disenfranchised people, subjectively photographing those on the fringes of society while articulating a strong belief in the freedom of the individual and in the freedom and power of his images. Lyon's early photographs were about the experiences of individuals, and the desire of individuals to change their world.

Born in Brooklyn in 1942, Lyon grew up in a liberal middle-class home in New York City. He began to make photographs in 1959 and immediately focused on the people around him. He studied history at the University of Chicago before joining the civil rights movement in 1962. From 1963 to 1964 Lyon was staff photographer for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). He photographed many historical events related to the civil rights struggle and captured an intimate, behind-the-scenes view of people on the front lines of a social and cultural rebellion during the sixties. Returning to Chicago in 1965, Lyon joined the Chicago Outlaws motorcycle gang in order to photograph the group. This experience led to his seminal photographic study called *The Bikeriders*, a poignant look at one band of outsiders.



National Guard Arrest, Sit-in, Cambridge, Maryland, 1964



Demo Driver, The Wall Stadium, 1987-88

Lyon's next project documented the effects of change on the urban environment. He returned to New York in 1966 and photographed the demolition of buildings, resulting in his book *The Destruction of Lower Manhattan*. In 1967 he began to photograph in a number of Texas prisons for his next book, *Conversations with the Dead*. His pictures of the Texas Department of Corrections addressed the daily life of inmates, the inhumane conditions of incarceration, and the metaphorical capacity of institutions to imprison people psychologically. "The prisons we wish to abolish are within ourselves," Lyon once wrote. "When we tear down that wall, those of reinforced concrete will fall by their own dead weight."

Danny Lyon began to make films in 1969. Like his photographs, his films are subjective, personal meditations about the nature of institutions and people living on the margins of society. They depict the failures of divisive institutions and portray alternative social structures that bring people together. His films explore a range of topics, from the Chicano people and culture of New Mexico to an autobiographical look at his family.

This exhibition also includes photographs from Lyon's other major series: *Haiti*, *The Pits*, and *Family Work*. After moving to New Mexico in the early 1970s, his family and personal life became a new source of inspiration. In contrast to his projects about outsiders, social institutions, poverty, or destruction, his documentation of family and friends is overtly introspective and narrative. It is—like much of Lyon's art—also universal since his anecdotes about his family and dreams intersect with the stories of all Americans. Ultimately, it is the inquiring nature of Lyon's perceptive images, from his early photographs of the civil rights movement to contemporary views of the inner city, that yields a snapshot of American social history.

Philip Brookman, Curator of Photography and Media Arts

The Southern Civil Rights Movement 1962-1964

"During the 1960s, Danny Lyon used his camera to tell the moving and dramatic story which was occurring in the South."

— Rep. John Lewis, Member of Congress

The southern civil rights movement fought for the desegregation of public institutions across the United States. Following a 1954 Supreme Court ruling that ordered desegregation of public schools, and Martin Luther King's subsequent boycott of Montgomery, Alabama busses, several groups formed to organize activities. On February 1, 1960, four African American college students sat down for an hour at a segregated North Carolina lunch counter. Later that year, college students across the south came together to found the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). In 1962, Danny Lyon was studying history at the University of Chicago. When he saw what was happening in a photograph reproduced in the college paper, he set off to join the movement. Following several trips to Cairo, Illinois and Albany, Georgia, Lyon became the first staff photographer for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in 1963. He photographed many historic events for SNCC, including sit-ins, demonstrations, voter registration drives, the 1963 March on Washington, the Mississippi Summer Project, and the aftermath of the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham. Lyon also helped produce posters and pamphlets, many made from his photographs, to spread information about the civil rights struggle.

The Bikeriders 1963-1966

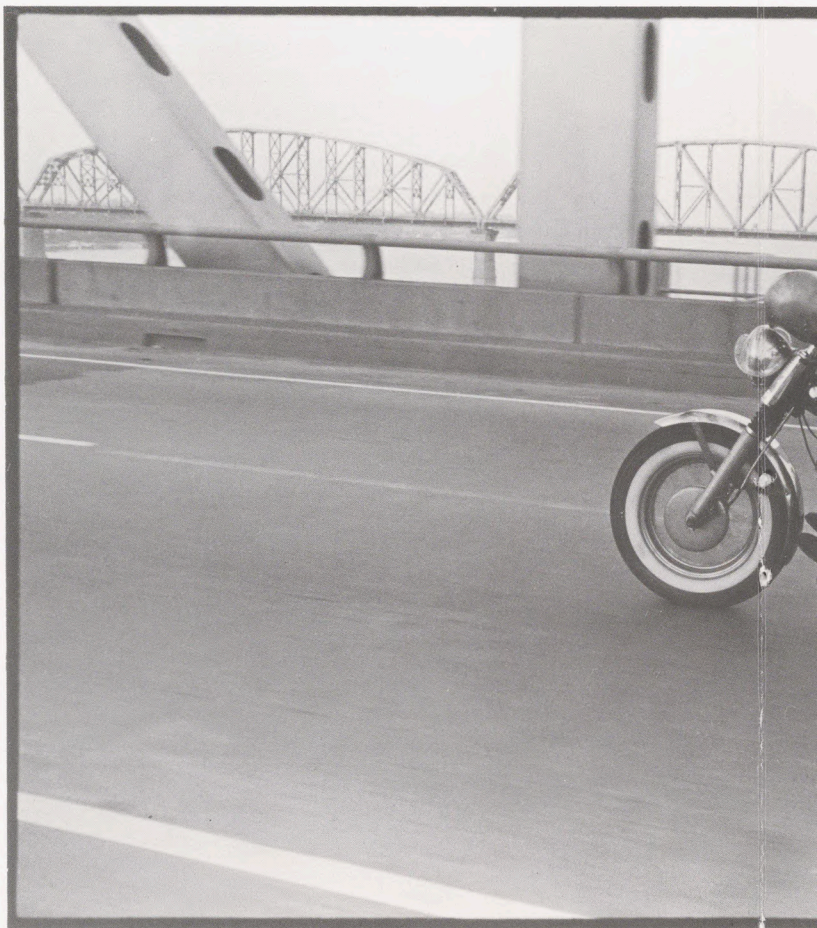
In 1965 and 1966 Lyon rode with the Chicago Outlaws, an Illinois motorcycle gang. He had begun to photograph bikers in 1963. During this time he chronicled his friends and their activities with the intention of documenting their world. He produced a photographic book about this underground society, focusing on the lives, machines, and culture of the bikeriders. These photographs first appeared in a one-person exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago, organized by Hugh Edwards in 1966. His book *The Bikeriders* was published in 1968. Now out of print, it was an innovative and influential example of an artist-produced photography book which reproduced collage elements, combined with photographs and lengthy interviews, to convey a feeling of personal and group experience.

The Destruction of Lower Manhattan 1966-1967

The photographs in Lyon's third major project were taken near the same neighborhoods recorded in 1888 by Jacob Riis in his classic photographic study *How the Other Half Lives*, about poverty in New York's lower Manhattan. Supported by the New York State Council on the Arts, Lyon photographed hundreds of deserted buildings before they were demolished during a time of urban renewal. Impressed by the photographs of Walker Evans, Lyon often used large-format cameras for this project, rather than the smaller, hand-held camera he usually used. The photographs in this exhibition, all vintage prints made while Lyon was photographing the buildings, were reproduced in his 1969 book *The Destruction of Lower Manhattan*.

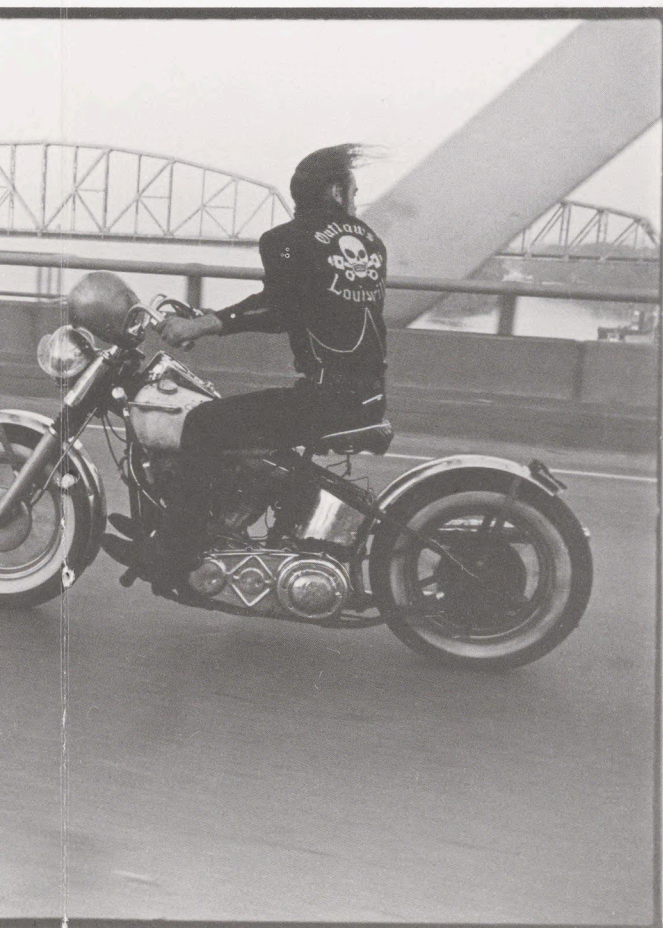
The Texas Department of Corrections 1967-1968

In 1967 Lyon was given permission to photograph within a number of penitentiaries in Texas. There were no restrictions placed on his activity during this fourteen-month project, other than a warning not to "let the men con me." Lyon produced an empathic series that depicts prison inmates in a humane manner. His photographs of forced field labor and heat exhaustion, arrival procedures, showers, visitation, and "free time" all explore the physical realities and institutional nature of prison life. These pictures offer a serious critique of these institutions. Lyon worked with inmates to produce *Born to Lose*, a small portfolio of images printed inside prison walls. From the start, Lyon planned to make a major book about his experience and in 1971 he published *Conversations with the Dead: Photographs of Prison Life with the Letters and Drawings of Billy McCune, #122054*. This book is a combined effort of Lyon and one inmate, McCune, who was officially diagnosed as retarded and was once condemned to death. *Conversations with the Dead* is a montage of carefully sequenced photographs, documents, writing, and drawings that addresses the institutionalization of the inmates' lives. These vintage prints shown in the exhibition, produced in Midway and Houston, Texas, are the first ever made from Lyon's original negatives.



Decorated Prints and Film Frames 1967-1987

Danny Lyon began to make films in 1969, using documentary techniques he pioneered as a still-photographer and book artist. These methods include shooting long scenes, using a hand-held camera with available light, and creating a discontinuous narrative structure. His films told stories, but not in a linear fashion. His early films were about his neighbors in New Mexico, where he moved in 1970: Chicanos, Native Americans, and a group of retarded white males. Other subjects were disenfranchised youths, whom Lyon filmed repeatedly; a group of homeless children living on the streets of a Colombian seaport town; a Houston tattoo artist; sculptor Mark di Suvero; and Lyon's family history. He also enlarged frames selected from his films and used them to make still photographs that depict the passage of time. In 1975 he began to draw and write directly on his photographs. Inspired by a new understanding of his earlier photographs, he wrote statements on old pictures to express his feelings in the present. In these images, as in his books and films, Lyon explored his ongoing interest in combining language with his pictures.



Haiti 1983-1986

In 1986 a popular uprising ousted Jean Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier, the dictator who had ruled Haiti since 1971. By November of the following year, the Haitian people's hope for free elections was crushed by the military. Danny Lyon had been a frequent visitor to Haiti during the last years of Duvalier's reign. He was there during the 1986 revolution and the photographs he made document poverty, as well as dramatic historical moments. In 1988 Lyon published his Haitian photographs by himself, along with an eye-witness account of his experiences, in a book titled *Merci Gonaïves*. Gonaïves is the small Haitian town where the revolt began.

The Pits 1987-1988

In 1987 and 1988 Danny Lyon photographed stock car races and demolition derbies. These photographs, like those he made of bikeriders in the 1960s, show Lyon's interest in American cultural icons. His study of the "car culture" is about the interaction of people and their automobiles, and the sensation of freedom that people achieve from victory, destruction, and survival.

Family Work 1978-1990

In his 1981 retrospective book *Pictures from the New World*, Danny Lyon wrote, "My family and friends have become a subject for me not out of any sense of desperation or their appropriateness as subjects, but out of that hardest of feelings to transcribe, happiness." As he began to look inward at his own personal world, Lyon also began to experiment with Polaroid film and color photographs, combining them with souvenirs and family pictures in constructed collages or montages. In this way he focused his work on his own life, incorporating autobiographical elements and personal feelings. Now living and working on a farm in upstate New York, Lyon has revealed his own world—his dreams and personal history—through collages and montages about his wife Nancy, and his four children Gabrielle, Raphael, Noah, and Rebecca. These works, like his films, are constructed by combining multiple images in sequences. Imbued with personal meaning and experiences, they can be read as narratives or stories. Lyon's family work led to the publication of his children's book *I Like to Eat Right on the Dirt*.

Bushwick 1993

In 1992 Danny Lyon followed a group of young men from a New York City subway car to their street corner hang out in Bushwick, a neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York. Lyon began to photograph their world, an ongoing project he continues to pursue. Most of these youths sold drugs, had been or would be shot, or went to jail. Lyon is also documenting the painted memorials created for those who are killed in neighborhood violence.

Crossing the Ohio River, Louisville, 1966

Schedule of Affiliated Programs

Lectures and Discussions at the Corcoran

The Corcoran Gallery of Art presents a series of lectures and public discussions at the museum that relate to topics in the exhibition *Danny Lyon: Photo-Film, 1959-1993*.

■ Tuesday, February 8, 6:30 pm

A Conversation with Danny Lyon

The Frances and Armand Hammer Auditorium
\$30/FRIENDS, \$40/non-members,
(\$10/members, lecture only,
\$15/non-members, lecture only).
(202) 638-3211, ext.. 505 for reservations.

Meet photographer/filmmaker Danny Lyon, who will speak about his life and work as an artist in the context of his retrospective exhibition at the Corcoran. Sponsored by the Friends of the Corcoran, Lyon's lecture will be followed by a buffet reception and private viewing of the exhibition with the artist. A limited number of tickets are available for the lecture only.

■ Sunday, March 6, 3:00 pm

A Conversation with Julian Bond

The Frances and Armand Hammer Auditorium
\$5/members, students, seniors, \$10/non-members,
includes admission to the museum.
(202) 638-3211, ext.. 321 for reservations.

Meet civil rights leader and teacher Julian Bond, who will discuss his life and work in the context of the civil rights movement. Bond was communication director of SNCC from 1960 to 1965 and served in the Georgia State Senate for 20 years. He teaches history and politics of the civil rights movement at the University of Virginia and at American University. Poetry by E. Ethelbert Miller.

■ Thursday, March 10, 7:00 pm

Memories of the Southern Civil Rights Movement, a Public Discussion

The Frances and Armand Hammer Auditorium
\$5/members, students, seniors, \$10/non-members,
includes admission to the museum.
(202) 638-3211, ext. . 321 for reservations.

Moderated by journalist Charles Cobb, Rep. John Lewis, Danny Lyon, D.C. City Councilman Frank Smith, Dr. Joyce Ladner, and other former Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee members, will discuss the role of SNCC in the civil rights struggle and the future of the civil rights movement in the United States. Performance by Kwelismith.

■ Thursday, March 24, 7:00 pm

Deborah Willis:

Civil Rights Photography Revisited

The Tapestry Room (limited seating),
free with museum admission.
(202) 638-3211, ext. 321 for reservations.

Curator and art historian Deborah Willis will discuss the use of photographic media in representing the civil rights movement, from early work by documentary photographers to contemporary artists who now reconfigure the imagery and experiences of the era. Willis is coordinator of collections for the Smithsonian's National African American Museum Project. A widely published author, her forthcoming book is *Picturing Us: African American Identity in Photography*.

Film Series at AFI

The Corcoran Gallery of Art, in collaboration with the American Film Institute, presents a series of films by Danny Lyon, including the world premiere of Lyon's new film *Media Man*. All programs are at the National Film Theater, American Film Institute, John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Washington, D.C. \$5.00/Corcoran and AFI members, \$6.00 non-members. For information call AFI at (202) 828-4091.

■ Friday, March 11, 6:30 pm

Danny Lyon will be present to introduce his films.

Media Man, World premiere, 1994

16mm, black and white and color, 60 minutes.

Camera: Danny Lyon. Sound: Nancy Lyon. Editors:
Danny Lyon and Nancy Lyon.

Between 1989 and 1993 Danny and Nancy Lyon traveled around the country to make a film together. *Media Man* begins in a garden where Lyon announces that he will make a film "all about America.... The good America." He then smashes a large rotten pumpkin. With scenes in New York, Mississippi, and New Mexico, intercut with a cat's funeral and lots of fishing, traditional processes of documentary filmmaking are turned inside out. Instead of claiming to deliver the "truth," Danny and Nancy Lyon admit in this film that they are, "quite frankly, lost."

***Born to Film*, 1982**

16mm, color and black and white, 33 minutes.

Camera and editor: Danny Lyon. Sound: Gary Leon Hill and Nancy Lyon. Cast: Raphael Lyon. Includes footage by Dr. Ernst F. Lyon.

Born to Film is an autobiographical work that combines Lyon's footage of his son with family movies shot in the 1940s by his father, who immigrated to the U.S. from Germany. This film is an allegorical meditation on childhood and filmmaking which mixes a fictional story about a child, played by Lyon's son Raphael, with a cinematic time capsule of the filmmaker's own youth.

■ Saturday, March 12, 6:30 pm

***Llanito*, 1971**

16mm, black and white, 51 minutes. Camera and editor: Danny Lyon. Sound: Buck Dant.

Llanito, the first part of Lyon's New Mexico trilogy, is also the name of a small community in the northern part of the state. Lyon depicts Llanito through the eyes of young Chicano Willie Jaramillo, and his friends. The film enters the lives of a variety of people, from an alcoholic native to the residents of a home for the mentally ill. *Llanito* is a kind of passion play about the elements of suffering, which includes one resident's bizarre religious testament.

***Little Boy*, 1977**

16mm, color, 54 minutes. Camera: Danny Lyon. Sound: Buck Dant and Paul Justman. Editor: Paul Justman.

The second part of Lyon's trilogy filmed in Bernalillo, *Little Boy* is also the name of the first atomic bomb, built in New Mexico. The film is about the troubled childhood of Willie Jaramillo and about organizer Ike de Vargas, who has directed his anger and knowledge into politics. *Little Boy* places Willie and Ike against a backdrop of nuclear power and the native people in the community who protest mining on their land.

■ Tuesday, March 15, 6:30 pm

***Dear Mark*, 1981**

16mm, black and white on color stock, 15 minutes. Camera and editor: Danny Lyon. Cast: Mark di Suvero.

Shot in 1965 and 1975 in New York and France, *Dear Mark* is a comedy made for Lyon's friend, American sculptor Mark di Suvero. The artist's voice was replaced on the soundtrack by that of Hollywood cowboy, Gene Autry. The film focuses on di Suvero's construction of a heroic, abstract sculpture in Paris. It undercuts the rhetoric of art language by playfully subverting di Suvero's dialogue.



Film stills from *Media Man*, 1994

***Willie*, 1985**

16mm, color and black and white, 82 minutes.

Camera and editor: Danny Lyon. Sound: Nancy Lyon, Doug Kuntz, and Ed Hugetz. Assistant editor: Nancy Lyon.

Part three of Lyon's New Mexico trilogy, *Willie* completes his documentary essay about Willie Jaramillo. Now a 27-year old anti-social ex-con, Willie has been released from prison. Defying all authority, he is repeatedly arrested for minor offenses. Lyon juxtaposes Willie's life in Bernalillo with his life in prison, and scenes of his youth with statements by his childhood friend, a convicted murder condemned to die. Despite his sad life, the filmmaker identifies with Willie when he cries, "This is my life we're talking about."

■ Thursday, March 17, 6:30 pm

***Social Sciences 127*, 1969**

16mm, black and white and color, 21 minutes. Camera and editor: Danny Lyon. Sound: Ed Hugetz and Dave Gerth. Cast: Bill Sanders.

Danny Lyon's first film, *Social Sciences 127* is a portrait of Houston tattoo artist Bill Sanders in his "painless" tattoo shop. The film focuses on Sanders and the underground sub-culture of tattooing, which he explains in a classroom. When Lyon visits his shop, Sanders reveals his disillusionment with people and the war in Vietnam.

***Los Niños Abandonados*, 1975**

16mm, color, 63 minutes. Camera: Danny Lyon. Sound and editor: Paul Justman.

This film was shot in three dangerous weeks in Santa Marta, a small town on the coast of Columbia. *Los Niños Abandonados* is about the lives and struggles of abandoned children who sleep in the streets and survive by begging. Lyon was permitted to enter the closed world of these children, creating an unforgettable commentary with a simple, unencumbered realism.

The Corcoran Gallery of Art

500 Seventeenth Street, NW
Washington, D.C. 20006-4899

Admission Policy

The Corcoran is a privately-funded institution. Contributions are essential, and although they are not required for admission, it is hoped that those visitors able to contribute do so. Adults are requested to contribute \$3.00; seniors and students \$1.00; family groups of any size \$5.00; members and children under 12 are free.

Gallery Hours

Open every day except Tuesday,
10:00 am to 5:00 pm, and Thursdays until 9:00 pm, thanks to
a generous grant from the Mobil Corporation.

Location

One-half block west of the White House.

Wheelchair access

1701 E Street, NW

Metro

Blue/Orange line - Farragut West

Red line - Farragut North

Metro Bus: 32, 34, 36, 80, 81, H1, S1, L1, N1

Information

Recorded Information: 202-638-1439

To book tours: 202-638-1070

Administrative Offices: open Monday - Fridays,

9:00 am to 5:00 pm, 202-638-3211

Accessibility information: ext. 321

The Corcoran Shop

Books and catalogues related to the exhibition

Danny Lyon: Photo-Film, 1959-1990 (paperback \$39.95)

Memories of the Southern Civil Rights Movement
(paperback \$19.95)

I Like to Eat Right on the Dirt. (paperback \$34.95)

Merci Gonaïves. (paperback \$19.95)

A selection of postcards and posters is also available.

Danny Lyon: Photo-Film, 1959-1993 was organized by Ute Eskildsen for the Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, in collaboration with the Folkwang Museum, Essen, Germany. Most of the photographs are vintage prints, made by Lyon at the same time he was taking the pictures. Unless otherwise stated, all photographs and films are lent by Danny Lyon, courtesy of Jan Kessner Gallery, Los Angeles and Simon Lowinsky Gallery, New York. This exhibition was augmented by Danny Lyon and the Corcoran Gallery of Art specifically for its presentation in Washington, D.C. The section titled *The Southern Civil Rights Movement, 1962-1964* was significantly expanded in order to feature this early, historical aspect of the artist's work. A group of posters and documents from SNCC that reproduced Lyon's images have also been added, along with several original books and some rarely seen documents from the Texas Department of Corrections essay. The Corcoran's presentation also includes, for the first time, Lyon's most recent photographs from Bushwick.

Student guides and teacher materials about Danny Lyon's photographs of the southern civil rights movement will be available for use in schools from the Corcoran's Education Department. For further information call 202-638-3211, ext. 321.

Danny Lyon: Photo-Film, 1959-1993 is funded, in part, by the National Endowment for the Arts. This presentation and accompanying programs at the Corcoran are supported, in part, by the D.C. Commission on the Arts and Humanities, the Eugene and Agnes E. Meyer Foundation, the Sheraton Washington Hotel, and the President's Exhibition Fund.

All photographs copyright by Danny Lyon.

Cover: *Nancy at Indiana Dunes*, 1993.